

A COMPREHENSIVE OFFICER SABBATICAL PROGRAM: RETHINKING THE MILITARY OFFICER CAREER PATH

BY

COMMANDER JAMES M. GERLACH
United States Navy Reserve

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U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5050

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**A COMPREHENSIVE OFFICER SABBATICAL PROGRAM:
RETHINKING THE MILITARY OFFICER CAREER PATH**

by

Commander James M. Gerlach
United States Navy Reserve

William H. Cleckner
Project Advisor

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U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

ABSTRACT

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A COMPREHENSIVE OFFICER SABBATICAL PROGRAM: RETHINKING THE MILITARY OFFICER CAREER PATH

The demographic changes affecting military recruiting and retention are so profound in their implications that it may be time to begin rethinking what a military career looks like.

—Dr. David S.C. Chu¹

The military personnel system created in the second half of the twentieth century has produced one of the finest militaries in history.² It formed a viable all-volunteer force, reached a level of racial integration that is a model for the rest of civilian society, achieved significant levels of gender integration and successfully transformed itself when the Cold War ended.³

The military personnel system produced an officer career path characterized, in most general terms, by twenty-plus years of uninterrupted military service. The military personnel system was, though, rooted in a belief that the recruitment and retention of officers would not be in direct competition with civilian employers; so long as America retained a military, the military would be able to retain the best and brightest of its officer corps. However, the operating environment for the military officer and the domestic social environment have changed significantly since the implementation of the current military personnel system.

First, the nature of officership has changed. Today's military requires officers who can think strategically, can think "out of the box" and must be able to do so at increasingly junior levels.⁴ Today's officers "must be comfortable making decisions in ambiguous environments, understand the strategic implications of tactical situations," and must be able to succeed in complex, irregular environments.⁵ Officers must possess characteristics such as "vision, innovation, adaptability, and creativity and the

ability to simplify complexities and clarify ambiguities— all while operating under stress.”⁶

Second, the competing civilian job market and other societal and environmental forces have changed since the implementation of the current military personnel policies.⁷ Civilian employers no longer provide “cradle-to-grave” economic security as they did in the post-World War II era. Whereas employment in the middle of the twentieth century provided “security” to the employee, the watchword at the start of the twenty-first century is “flexibility.”

The domestic social environment has also changed somewhat since the creation of the all-volunteer force.⁸ In the draft era, virtually every American had a family member who had served in the armed forces. Consequently, the armed forces were merely a microcosm of the larger American society. Now that the nation is almost 40 years removed from the end of the draft, two generations of Americans have grown up without the likelihood of having a family member that served in the military. As a result, a cultural gap has developed between the military and the society it serves.⁹

What has not changed since the implementation of the all-volunteer force is the need for the military to attract and retain both a sufficient number and the highest quality officers.¹⁰ The military needs to retain the best officers and maximize their skills and abilities in order to achieve the more proficient and professional officer corps required in the contemporary environment.

Due to externalities affecting retention, limited opportunities for formal and informal education outside the military environment, changing demographics within the military family, difficulty competing with characteristics of the civilian workforce and a

growing civil-military cultural gap, the military has not successfully maximized the quality, proficiency and professionalism of its officer corps.

This paper argues that we need to rethink what a military career looks like and proposes one potential, yet significant change to the officer career path designed to respond to the retention challenges, provide greater educational opportunities, address changing demographics, compete more effectively with the civilian economy and narrow the civil-military cultural gap resulting in a more skillful and professional officer corps.

Currently, a career military professional will spend twenty-plus years enveloped in the military culture. Forays outside the culture, such as academic study or work in the interagency process, are rare and are often seen as counter-productive to the advancement of one's career.¹¹ Developing a comprehensive sabbatical program could address the issues of retention, education, changing demographics, civilian competition and civil-military gap outlined above while increasing the skills and competencies the officer corps requires in the modern, complex operating environment.

A comprehensive sabbatical program would require military professionals, at certain junctures in their careers, to take a hiatus from military service for a two or three-year period to pursue an education, start a family, work in the civilian labor force or otherwise pursue a life outside the military before returning to the military to resume their career.

Though this paper addresses the need to rethink the officer career path and proposes a sabbatical program for all four branches of the armed forces, the case is particularly acute in the Army. The Army is the largest branch and as a result of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan has had unprecedented levels of deployment and

mobilization. Many of the problems, especially the issue of retention, are most pronounced in the Army¹² and as such, passages throughout the paper will frequently refer to Army-centric positions or circumstances.

Previous Sabbatical Programs and Proposals

Officer sabbaticals are not a new topic. For well over a decade, the Department of Defense has studied many characteristics of the officer personnel system including variable officer career lengths, promotion timing, compensation, benefits, career patterns and optimal active duty service obligation.¹³ As part of developing a more flexible personnel system, the Department of Defense has also explored “greater use of extended leaves for its military officers.”¹⁴

Both officials and commentators¹⁵ have recommended sabbaticals as a possible solution to remedy certain personnel challenges. However, all of the proposals, whether termed “sabbaticals,” “temporary separation,” “career intermission” or “extended leave” have addressed discrete personnel issues and have not proposed anything as expansive as the comprehensive sabbatical program.

The United States Coast Guard has offered a sabbatical program titled the Temporary Separation (TEMPSEP) Program for both enlisted personnel and commissioned officers. The policy was originally called the Care of Newborn Child (CNC) policy and was implemented after a 1998 study aimed at increasing retention.¹⁶ It was designed to allow a new mother to take up to a 24-month absence to care for a child. In 2003, the Coast Guard expanded the CNC policy into TEMSEP which “allows Coast Guard members to temporarily separate and pursue growth or other opportunities outside the service, while providing a mechanism for their return to active duty.”¹⁷

Under this policy, career oriented officers and enlisted members are allowed a one-time separation from Active Duty for up to two years.¹⁸ Members who are approved for TEMSEP are eligible to affiliate with the Reserve during the separation.¹⁹ Service members can use the TEMSEP for purposes as diverse as pursuing an education, caring for elderly or sick parents, or just giving members who are unsure about pursuing a Coast Guard career a chance to pursue outside opportunities.²⁰

A 2003 Rand study evaluated the advisability of sabbatical leaves for military officers. Its analysis yielded categories of program options “that should not conflict with military practice and that may provide various benefits based on their use in the civilian workforce.”²¹ The Rand study is probably the first to recognize the potential for a comprehensive program insofar as it regarded the reason for the sabbatical as irrelevant. The study suggested six broad categories of sabbaticals: *Personal extended leaves*, such as maternity or paternity absences, elder care, or leave to attend to a family crisis; *Sabbatical leaves* for the purposes of academic pursuit; *Personal growth leaves* to allow participants to increase their education or gain experience in a nonmilitary job market; *Social service leaves* with a specific purpose, such as working with nonprofit community organizations; *Voluntary leaves to meet service needs*, which can serve as a manpower management tool, allowing the services to reduce numbers for a particular year group when necessary; and *Expansions for existing programs*, such as the current return-to-service program similar to the current U.S. Coast Guard program.²²

The Rand study noted that leaves would be granted on an individual basis, that these leaves “could appeal to officers at many different career stages, based on the

reason for their leave,” and that the leaves “would be available only to officers who have satisfied their minimum service requirement and who are judged of sufficient merit.”²³ The study concluded that “such a program might also prompt the retention of individuals who would otherwise leave the service.”²⁴

Most recently, Congress has authorized the Department of Defense to experiment with a more broad-based sabbatical program. While noting that each service supported educational programs that allowed certain service members to attend civilian educational institutions and return without penalty, there was no program that allowed members to take an extended break in service for personal or other professional reasons.²⁵

Section 533 of the FY2009 National Defense Authorization Act authorized a “Career Flexibility” pilot program aimed at enhancing retention by allowing personnel an opportunity to pursue other personal or professional goals.²⁶ Participation in this program is limited to twenty enlisted personnel and twenty officers from each service per year and requires a service obligation of two months for every month of sabbatical.²⁷ Under this program, service members will leave active duty for up to three years and return in the same grade and years of service that they held when they began their sabbatical.²⁸ “Time in the program does not count for retirement eligibility, retired pay or years of service.”²⁹

Those taking the time off would be required to participate in the Individual Ready Reserve and would receive a monthly stipend of \$100. While they would not have to participate in any military drills, they would have to report to a military office once a month and perform “one day of active duty each year for medical and administrative

screening.”³⁰ This pilot program begins on January 1, 2009 and is authorized through December 31, 2014 with a final report on March 1, 2015.³¹

The comprehensive officer sabbatical program discussed herein expands on the very limited proposals offered to date. It proposes a program, not merely offered, but required of all officers over the course of their careers. This proposal is a revolutionary way of rethinking what the typical officer career path looks like and is a significant departure from the current “social contract” offered by career military service. While the military will still offer a competitive compensation package, it will ask officers to step outside the safety net of this compensation package at several junctures throughout their careers.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to this program is psychological -- the thought of a military career being anything other than a period of continuous services. Hence, this paper is not merely an argument in favor of sabbaticals, but rather is a call to rethink the entire concept of what a military officer career path looks like.³²

Although there are no legal impediments to implementing such a program and any service specific regulations can be rather easily modified, there are a host of practical considerations involved in designing and implementing this sabbatical program. Who is eligible? When are they eligible? How long are the sabbaticals? How frequent are the sabbaticals? What about medical coverage? What about bonus or proficiency pay? Many of these questions could trigger a monograph of their own. Many others require a service-specific or branch-specific analysis. However, in order to frame the analysis provided below, the following baseline characteristics are included in the proposed comprehensive officer sabbatical program:

--The program would be mandatory with an expectation that an officer would take multiple sabbaticals at designated points in his or her career. The services would be allowed to make exceptions to this policy for high-demand, low-density specialties, but otherwise, sabbaticals would become a normal and expected way point on the officer career path.

--Nominally, the first two sabbaticals would take place before the twenty-year point in the officer's career and a third sabbatical would take place after twenty years of service. An officer intending to retire after twenty years of service would have sabbaticals at approximately the six and fourteen-year points. Officers staying until mandatory retirement would take a third sabbatical at approximately the twenty-second year of service.

--The officer would not receive base pay or allowances while on sabbatical. Officers on sabbatical should have the option of retaining health care benefits. The services could make determinations whether the officers could retain special pay or proficiency pay. The underlying concept is that the officer would live on the civilian economy, minimizing his or her ties to the military service during the sabbatical period.

--During the sabbatical, the clock would stop on the officer's longevity for pay and retirement purposes. For instance, after six years of service, the officer takes a three-year sabbatical. When the officer returns to service, he or she would have six years of service to count towards pay purposes or retirement, not nine.

--Officers on sabbatical would not count against congressionally authorized active duty end strength. The services could establish policies addressing whether

individuals on sabbatical would be allowed to affiliate with the selected reserve or would be administratively assigned to the Individual Ready Reserve.

The Need for a Comprehensive Officer Sabbatical Program

The existing and proposed extended leave or sabbatical programs described above illustrate some of the many diverse reasons why sabbatical programs benefit individual service members and the armed forces as a whole. The circumstances motivating the call for the discrete, targeted sabbaticals are germane to the discussion, but there are a host of more holistic reasons why a comprehensive officer sabbatical program would benefit the military and the nation.

This comprehensive officer sabbatical program could be a significant factor in achieving the overarching goal of retaining the best officers and maximizing the skills and abilities of these officers. It could allow the military to retain its best and brightest officers by stemming the junior officer exodus created in part by increasing deployment rates. It could offer the chance for increased educational opportunities, chances to develop interpersonal skills and broaden the military skill base. It could address several inequities resulting from changing demographics in the military family. It could more closely mirror the civilian sector by attracting a larger officer recruitment base and increasing the service life of officers. Finally, it could help bridge the growing civil-military cultural gap in our society.

Improving Officer Retention

Military officers, especially junior Army officers, are burned out by increased mobilization and deployment rates.³³ The pace of repeated deployments has an effect on retention. Although one deployment actually improves retention, “as soldiers draw

satisfaction from using their skills in the real world”³⁴ and second deployments neutralize the effect on retention, “it’s the third deployment that begins to burn out soldiers”³⁵ and there’s “no large-scale historical precedent for military planners to examine” a fourth deployment.³⁶

The burn-out factor manifests itself in two different ways. First, officers, specifically junior officers, are not given enough dwell time to mentally regroup and to reconnect with their families. This has resulted in a divorce rate among Army officers that has tripled since 2003.³⁷ “Internal surveys show that the percentage of officers who cite ‘amount of time separated from family’ as a primary factor for leaving the Army has at least doubled since 2002, to more than 30 percent.”³⁸

Second, after spending years in a combat environment, using advanced leadership skills and often inventing doctrine on the spot, these officers are not looking forward to returning to a pre-war training cycle characterized by bureaucracy and administrative paperwork.³⁹ Unfortunately, many of the current opportunities to rotate away from deployable status are often either too short, such as the one-year hiatus for Command and General Staff College or War College, or very high stress assignments, such as recruiting duty.

Although many commentators blame ongoing operations since 2002 as the primary driver of officer attrition, the issue of the junior officer exodus had plagued the Army for almost a decade. Beginning in the “mid-1990s, the Army began to suffer from increasing attrition among its junior officers.”⁴⁰ Junior officers, especially captains, left the Army in increasing numbers from 1995-2001.⁴¹ After 2001, the problem continued to accelerate. While in 2003, approximately eight percent of junior officers at the four to

nine year mark left for other careers, by 2006 the attrition rate had risen to thirteen percent.⁴² According to James Hosek, an expert in military retention at the RAND Corporation, the five percent increase in retention “could potentially be a serious problem,” since over time “this rate of attrition would halve the number of officers who reach their tenth year in uniform and intend to take senior leadership roles.”⁴³

The Army is clearly losing some junior officers who make a determination that opportunities are more plentiful and more attractive in the civilian world. However, retaining junior officers is more than just a calculus based upon raw numbers. The Army needs to keep quality junior officers. Simply addressing junior officer shortfalls through increased recruiting and higher rates of promotion does not necessarily give the Army the right balance of officers required to confront conflict in the counterinsurgency environment. “The army will not be able to develop experienced and skilled junior officers until it is able to hold them in positions longer and provide them with a deeper, broader set of training opportunities.”⁴⁴ Unlike the private-sector or other government agencies who can address a shortage of middle managers by throwing more money at the problem – essentially hiring more middle managers, “in the Army's rigid hierarchy, all officers start out at the bottom, as second lieutenants.”⁴⁵ Thus, a decline in officer retention threatens not only current mission readiness, but also its long-term institutional future.⁴⁶

The sabbatical program could help alleviate both of these situations. First, the program would allow for a two-to-three year period out of the active military, out of a deployable status and give the officer the necessary window of opportunity to reconnect with his or her family. Because this time is spent outside of the military culture, the

officer would not have daily reminders of combat related stresses. Second, the opportunity to explore options outside the military would give the officer an opportunity to travel outside their intellectual comfort zone and experience some of the excitement of learning new things in new environments. In other words, they would have the opportunity to experience the intellectual challenges of the modern, complex combat environment without the combat stress or separation.

Expanding Formal and Informal Educational Opportunities

In today's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous operating environment, military officers need greater exposure to life outside the military to enable them to master the interpersonal and cultural skills required for success in counterinsurgency warfare. Professor Leonard Wong of the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute noted that "...OIF is unique in that a large number of junior officers are dealing with cultural intricacies that have potential strategic implications."⁴⁷

Linda Miller of the Rand Corporation noted the changing nature of officership as well. "Officers need to develop their cognitive muscles if we are to sustain a flexible, adaptive Army. Exposure to problem-solving frameworks, jargon and strategies of civilian leaders expands the officers' toolkit and counters Army 'groupthink.'"⁴⁸

Officers can enhance their cognitive skills in a number of ways. First and foremost is through traditional school-based graduate education. Equally as important is the experience that can be garnered through working with another government agency, a non-governmental organization or a defense related industry. Finally, just removing an officer from the military environment and exposing him or her to civilian

employers and institutions broadens the perspective of the officer and provides a larger tool kit of interpersonal skills to draw from.

The benefits of education in general, and specifically a graduate education, are not in serious doubt since “the most powerful tool any soldier carries is not his weapon but his mind.”⁴⁹ Senior combatant commanders need junior officers with an understanding of the military’s role in the national security strategy and an appreciation of the complex issues involved in an irregular warfare environment.⁵⁰ In this new era of conflict, “the military must prepare soldiers to think critically and analytically much earlier in their careers.”⁵¹

The military provides many opportunities to pursue advanced education, but most do not allow the service member to journey outside the military environment. While military schools offer superb academic programs, they do not expose the officer to the more diverse spectrum of viewpoints available at civilian universities. There are many reasons why civilian graduate schooling is valuable for military officers. “The first and most important is that a stint at graduate school takes military officers out of their intellectual comfort zones.”⁵²

Civilian graduate institutions are also preferable because when an officer leaves a lecture at a military school, he or she still stays within the military environment, or otherwise stated, “the familiar cloister and grindstone.”⁵³ Yet, when that same officer leaves a lecture or classroom in a civilian school, he or she is living outside the military environment or “beyond the cloister.”⁵⁴

However, the cost to the Army of maintaining the current civilian school program is expensive; not just in terms of dollars spent, but in terms of the number of officers

who count against active duty strength while attending graduate school. The Army currently sends 400 to 500 officers annually to attend fully funded graduate school programs and is expanding the existing program to include another 300 per year in 2010.⁵⁵ Another program is focused on USMA cadets and ROTC scholarship students who agree to serve an additional three-year tour “for the guaranteed opportunity to attend graduate school between their 6th and 11th years of service.”⁵⁶ At full implementation of these programs in 2010, the Army will send approximately 1,100 officers a year to graduate school.⁵⁷ There are, however, some significant manpower implications involved in sending this number of officers to graduate school. Since graduate programs take up to 24 months to complete, up to 2,200 officers who count against authorized active duty end-strength could be in graduate school at any given time.⁵⁸

Though the services may still wish to retain service graduate schools that concentrate on military courses of instruction, by shifting the emphasis toward using sabbaticals to pursue graduate education, the military can experience cost savings while allocating active duty billets towards more core warfighting functions. To encourage officers to pursue graduate education while on sabbatical, the services may wish to consider expanded GI Bill provisions, use of Tuition Assistance programs and other financial incentives.

Formal graduate education is not the only means of broadening an officer's horizons. There are a number of civilian job opportunities that have a direct application to military duties, especially in counterinsurgency, multinational or intergovernmental operations. The sabbatical program would give officers the opportunity to work in

environments such as other agencies in the federal government, organizations within state and local government, law enforcement, defense industries, and non-governmental organizations. "Immersion into a world of diverse civilians . . . would help prepare officers for future military interactions with coalition partners, relief workers and indigenous populations."⁵⁹ The sabbatical program would give officers exposure to applicable or allied fields that would prove beneficial at points further on in their careers.

The complex nature of current military operations dictates that future operations will have an interagency aspect, and perhaps even an interagency lead with the Department of Defense playing a supporting role. As such, military officers need to become more "knowledgeable of and embedded within the interagency process" in order to meet future national security challenges.⁶⁰ Similarly, military officers must improve their ability to work with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and become "cognitive of the role NGOs play."⁶¹ Allowing mid-level officers into these organizations during their sabbaticals can begin to fill the information gaps that "inhibit the Army's ability to effectively operate in today's complex national security environment."⁶²

Sabbaticals that afford officers the opportunity to work at the state and local levels of government "could enhance skills required to stabilize and rebuild war-torn societies."⁶³ Officers performing sabbaticals with these organizations would "gain expertise in areas such as law, banking, government, management, city planning, transportation, public policy, community policing and business administration."⁶⁴

Any job with a civilian employer, not just with a defense-related aspect would give a military officer relevant experience for operating in a complex environment. In recent experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan many troops deployed have served as

embedded trainers – training and mentoring the Afghan and Iraqi security forces. A significant portion of these trainers were forces from the Army Reserve and National Guard. Despite the relative lack of time that the Reserve and Guard forces spent preparing for mobilization compared to their active duty counterparts, these forces excelled in the training and mentoring roles.

Guard and Reserve officers who have civilian jobs and interaction within their civilian communities bring additional analytic tools that they can use to impose their ideas on the indigenous forces they work with.⁶⁵ The typical Reserve officer, with experience working with committees, serving on not-for-profit boards, or engaged in similar situations with groups of independent-thinking “equals” would find mentoring indigenous security forces to be a relatively easy task. Periodic sabbaticals that give military officers a chance to work in the civilian workforce and experience working relationships that differ significantly from the military’s rigid hierarchal system would give these officers greater opportunity to hone these interpersonal skills.

Responding to Changing Demographics in the Military Family

Many changes in military demographics have taken place since the implementation of the all-volunteer force. The changes have taken place on the home front as increasing numbers of military spouses have entered the workforce. The changes have also taken place within the services as increasing numbers of women have entered the military.

Among the more significant changes is the fact that more military spouses are working. By 2002, 54% of the military population was married and over 70% of the military spouses were employed.⁶⁶ The 70% figure represented a 9% increase over the

previous five years.⁶⁷ Many military spouses have successful careers or the potential for successful careers.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, many military spouses have to forego their career opportunities to accommodate their military spouse.

Compounding this problem is the fact that the military moves personnel to different geographic locations every two to three years to effect job changes.⁶⁹

“Homesteading’ — staying in one geographic location for a substantial portion of one’s career — is generally frowned upon.”⁷⁰

With more military spouses in the workforce, the frequent moves are disruptive to an increasing number of military spouses with careers.⁷¹ The officer sabbatical program would give military spouses a greater chance to foster their professional careers. If an officer were to exercise the sabbatical at the end of a three-year tour and were to stay in the same geographic region, it would give the spouse five to six years to establish him or herself in their chosen career.

Many military members face similar situations when confronting another significant family milestone – the decision to have a child. The Department of Defense has struggled somewhat over the years with the issue of maternity leave for military members -- both female and male.

The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Armed Services (DACOWITS), a committee that advises senior Department of Defense leaders on issues and policies related to the integration and well-being of women in the armed forces, has investigated this issue over a number of years and has recommended “developing sabbatical programs and allowing military families the option of remaining at

assigned installations during critical family events”⁷² because “the services are retaining women officers with families at lower rates than other groups.”⁷³

However, offering women extended time off for maternity is not a straight-forward issue. Giving military women more time off after the birth of a child can be perceived as “making military men think women are being given an unequal advantage.”⁷⁴ Dr. David S.C. Chu, Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, has suggested sabbatical programs as an option for reforming the services’ different maternity policies. “I think we need to be a little careful that we don’t damage the standing of women as a key element of the force in saying that they should not share their part of the overall force burdens in terms of how we utilize them.”⁷⁵ Dr. Chu further noted that a sabbatical “may be a superior alternative for those who would like room within which to develop a family.”⁷⁶

Such a sabbatical program would help normalize gender relations within the military. As Dr. Chu noted, whereas current policies of maternity leave could stigmatize women due to a perception of an “unequal advantage,” because the comprehensive sabbatical program would be mandatory for all officers, it would not have a stigmatizing effect on women. The sabbaticals would allow service members, regardless of gender to take time to begin a family or focus on starting a family. This could be especially advantageous for dual military families where the spouses could alternate sabbaticals to allow greater contact time between the children and a primary caregiver.

Competing With the Civilian Workforce

The military has sub-optimized its ability to attract the full spectrum of eligible recruits for the officer corps in part because of its inability to compete effectively with the

civilian workforce. At the other end of a military career, the military has sub-optimized its ability to retain its most talented officers due to a retirement system that prematurely separates officers from the service.

The civilian employment market today is much different than the civilian labor market that existed at the time the all-volunteer force was initiated. In the 1970's, prospective employees had an expectation that when they joined a firm or company they would stay there until they retired. The company took care of the employee's family health care plan and the employee became part of the company's defined retirement benefit plan. Today, most people entering the job market will change jobs every three to five years, rarely receive a fully-funded medical plan, and will invest in portable 401K retirement plans. "Workers change jobs, careers, and geographic location with increasing frequency. They leave and reenter the workforce and the schoolroom throughout their lives."⁷⁷ Civilian employers are increasingly recognizing these changing employee attitudes and as a result are increasingly offering sabbatical programs either for "people-oriented" reasons or to increase professional ability. Civilian employers would increasingly rather lose an employee for a one or two-year sabbatical than to lose the employee permanently and have to recruit and train a new employee.

Former Chief of Naval Operations Vernon C. Clark observed this trend in 2005. "This is a different world. . . . [We're] finding that youth's work expectations are different than their parents. Today's youth expect flexibility in their work, portability of retirement benefits, and a balance between time at work and free time."⁷⁸

While today's college graduates expect employment flexibility, military service is far from flexible. To the extent that military service is able to adopt some of the flexible characteristics of civilian employment without compromising military effectiveness, such efforts should be pursued. A comprehensive system of sabbaticals would appeal to new college graduates who desire flexibility in their careers and might not otherwise consider the more rigid military career path.

Parenthetically, most civilian employers would likely support this effort insofar as it gives them a supply of military officers who seek civilian employment during their sabbatical. Unlike the mid-twentieth century model where an employee was expected to stay with the same employer throughout his or her career, employees today change employers every three to five years. Civilian employers would not think it unusual and might look forward to receiving a top level, junior executive with a two-to-three-year commitment.

While the offer of flexibility might appeal to more junior officers, the strength of the comprehensive sabbatical program is truly realized when you consider the effect on senior officers. According to Dr. Chu, "we're trying to jam too much into a 20-year career."⁷⁹ Compared to private industry, U.S. military officers have relatively short careers.⁸⁰ Military officers are permitted to retire upon completion of twenty years of active duty service. An officer who is commissioned as a 22-year old Second Lieutenant right out of college or a service academy would be eligible to retire at age 42. At the other end of the spectrum, unless an officer is promoted to Flag or General rank, he or she will be forcibly retired after 30 years of service, or in the case of the 22-year old Second Lieutenant, at age 52.⁸¹

In comparison, in the civilian world, most executives are just beginning to hit their stride at age 40. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld noted this trend commenting “It seems to me in most entities across the globe that are successful financially, like private sector companies, they very much value people who are over 46.”⁸² In fact, “military personnel, who typically ‘retire’ in their forties, are easily able to secure attractive civilian jobs at the completion of their military careers”⁸³ due in part to the fact that they’re still in the prime of their performance capability.

Multiple, periodic sabbaticals would rectify this situation. If a military officer were forced to take two sabbaticals prior to reaching eligibility for retirement, and the time spent on sabbatical did not count towards retirement, an officer would not be eligible for retirement until age 46-48 – in effect, giving the military the advantage of four to six additional years of maturity and wisdom. At the other end of the retirement spectrum, assuming another sabbatical at the 22-year mark, a senior officer could be retained until age 58-61 allowing the military and the nation to benefit from an additional six to nine years of experience before the officer retires.

There has not been a rigorous examination of the financial impact of sabbatical programs. To the extent that the financial impact has been examined, it has been in the context of limited, targeted sabbatical programs and not comprehensive sabbatical programs such as the one addressed in this paper.

A 2003 Rand study noted that sabbatical programs “may be cost-efficient, either because they result in savings or because they offer a return on investment (ROI). Such return is generally expressed as increased retention, which produces benefits of greater experience and lower accessions, which can offset costs.”⁸⁴ Broadly speaking, “any

program offering leaves of limited length that change the retention behavior of at least 10 percent of the participants generally has a positive ROI.”⁸⁵ The study noted that the purpose of the leave, whether educational or personal, plays a minor part, at most, on the cost efficiency of the program.⁸⁶ Rather, “the aspects that determine cost-effectiveness are the duration of the leave, the number of participants, the compensation offered, and the likelihood that participants would otherwise have left the service.”⁸⁷

However, beyond any economic analysis based upon return on investment, there is another perhaps even greater avenue for recognizing cost savings through the comprehensive sabbatical program. As discussed above, the comprehensive sabbatical program has the effect of delaying the officer retirement age, and thus eligibility from 20 to 24-27 years at the low end and from 30 to 36-39 years at the high end. This delay has the effect of reducing the number of years an officer would receive retired pay from four to nine years depending on the length of sabbaticals, number of sabbaticals and time of retirement.

Narrowing the Civil-Military Cultural Gap

Many members of society do not have contact with or an appreciation for members of the military, and many military members do not have significant social or business contacts outside the military community. According to Commander, U.S. Central Command, General David Petraeus, “just as the military has developed certain stereotypes of academics, journalists and other civilians over the years, these groups in turn hold certain stereotypes about those in the military. It’s important that we in the

military understand those we serve—the American people—and it is equally important that our citizens understand those in uniform.”⁸⁸

While the civil-military gap is often discussed by academics in the context of civil control of the military, an equally important implication of the civil-military gap is the disconnect between the military and the potential recruits it must draw from society at large to fill its ranks. In the latter half of the twentieth century, military service was an accepted fact of life and most citizens had a direct familial connection with a military member. This was largely due to the vast number of Americans who had served in the Second World War and the fact that military conscription (albeit with several methods of deferment) remained in place until 1972. As of 1972, almost half of all adult males in the United States were veterans of the Armed Forces.⁸⁹ The sheer number involved made the shared experience of military service one of the most important agencies of socialization in our society and gave society a more common reference to and understanding of the military culture.⁹⁰ By 2000, only 12.7% of a population of 208 million Americans over the age of eighteen were veterans.⁹¹ Further, the military tends to educate, train, house, feed, care for and often retire its members outside the mainstream of civilian society. While this approach may serve well in a time of war and offer some efficiencies in military preparedness, it tends to marginalize the military's impact on society and insulates military members from larger societal issues and changes.

But more importantly, as average Americans lose personal contact with members of the military profession, potential recruits view the military and military service as

something outside their zone of familiarity and, accordingly, are hesitant to view military service as an option.

The panacea proscribed by many politicians and academics to cure the ills of this gap between the military and society is to reinstate the draft. Noel Koch, former special assistant to President Richard Nixon and an Assistant Secretary of Defense during President Reagan's administration observed that the draft "extended to the broadening of cultural horizons" and provided a "common civic grammar that encompasses those who have served and their families and friends."⁹² However, a return to conscription has little or no discernable political support⁹³ since "most of the top military brass seem to be opposed to a draft."⁹⁴

The issue of reducing the insularity of the armed forces is problematic and does not have easy solutions.⁹⁵ Some leaders, such as Congressman Ike Skelton, have advocated curtailing on-post facilities that enable military personnel to take care of most of their needs without much contact with civilians."⁹⁶ This would include housing, caring for and training the military within the general society. Although not intended to abolish military bases, it could diminish the closed societies that they tend to foster.

A sabbatical program that directs military officers into the civilian world – whether as graduate students, municipal employees, industry workers, with non-governmental agencies, or any other endeavor – would benefit "our country as a whole by helping to bridge the gap between those in uniform and those who, since the advent of the all-volunteer force, have had little contact with the military."⁹⁷

Conclusion

The military officer career path produced by the current military personnel system has developed a talented and proficient officer corps capable of simultaneously fighting the nation's wars while transforming the institution they serve. To maintain these capabilities, the military needs to retain its best officers and provide them with the necessary training and education to give them the skills required to operate in the complex, modern environment.

Implementing a comprehensive officer sabbatical program would address and could help alleviate many of the factors that inhibit the military's ability to retain its best officers and enrich their capabilities. The comprehensive sabbatical program would respond to the challenges involved in retaining the best junior officers. It would present an opportunity for officers to pursue formal graduate education or pursue on-the-job education by working for other governmental agencies, defense industries, non-governmental agencies or a host of civilian employers. It would respond to the changing demographics in the military family by giving military members the opportunity to give greater consideration to their spouses' careers and to take time away from the military to concentrate on family matters irrespective of gender. It would provide a mechanism for more effectively competing with the civilian sectors of the economy by making a military career more attractive to potential officers who prefer career flexibility over the rigidity of the current officer career path and would allow the military to retain the knowledge and wisdom of the most experienced officers beyond that which the current military retirement system allows. Finally, the comprehensive officer sabbatical program could serve as the catalyst for closing the civil-military cultural gap by giving

military officers exposure to more numerous and diverse sectors of society while giving members of the greater society increased contact with military members.

The comprehensive officer sabbatical program is an opportunity to keep the best officers and enrich the expertise they need to perform their duties in a complex, changing environment.

Endnotes

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² Ibid., 204.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kevin M. DeAntona, *Transforming the Operational Career Field Officer Path: Preparing Leaders for Today's Contemporary Operating Environment and to Lead the Army into the 21st Century*, Strategy Research Project (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 18 March 2005), 11.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ Mark R. Lewis, "Army Transformation and the Junior Officer Exodus," *Armed Forces and Society* 31, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 70.

⁷ Cindy Williams, "Conclusions and Recommendations" in *Filling the Ranks: Transforming the U.S. Personnel System* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 310 ("To a great extent, U.S. military pay and personnel policies reflect practices that prevailed in U.S. industry during the 1940s and 1950s when they were adopted. Since that time, the private sector has moved on; the military generally has not.").

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¹⁴ Harry J. Thie, Margaret C. Harrell, and Marc Thibault, *Officer Sabbaticals: Analysis of Extended Leave Options* (Arlington, VA: Rand Corporation, 2003), xiii.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Laura Miller, "Give Them Sabbaticals," *USA Today*, May 7, 2008, A11; James J. Carafano, "A 'Rucksack' for U.S. Military Personnel: Modernizing Military Compensation," *Heritage Foundation Executive Memorandum*, No. 1020, February 14, 2007, http://www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/upload/em_1020.pdf (accessed February 3, 2009).

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¹⁷ United States Coast Guard Officer Temporary Separation Program, <http://www.uscg.mil/opm/Opm1/opm-1septempsep.asp> (accessed February 3, 2009).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Williams, "Coast Guard's Sabbatical Program a Hit."

²¹ Thie, *Officer Sabbaticals*, xv-xvi.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Thie, *Officer Sabbaticals*, 18-19.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Lawrence Kapp et al., *CRS Report for Congress, FY2009 National Defense Authorization Act: Selected Military Personnel Policy Issues*, (Washington, DC: The Library of Congress, September 30, 2008), CRS-11.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Rick Maze, "Your Big Break?: Proposal Would Give Troops Up to 3 Years Off from Military," *Army Times*, April 7, 2008, 8.

³¹ Kapp, *FY09 National Defense Authorization Act*, CRS-11.

³² This paper does not address whether similar sabbaticals should be implemented for enlisted personnel. Indeed, many of the rationalizations provided for officer sabbaticals are equally applicable in the enlisted ranks.

³³ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Military Personnel Human Resources Strategic Plan*, 2.

³⁴ Andrew Tilghman, "The Army's Other Crisis: Why the Best and Brightest Young Officers are Leaving," *Washington Monthly* 39, no. 12: (December 2007), 48.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 46.

³⁸ Ibid., 47.

³⁹ CDR J. M. Gerlach, personal knowledge obtained on Anton Myrer Army Leader Day at U.S. Army War College on October 15, 2008 during discussions with Army Senior Leadership. Though the discussions centered on the promotion process and the relative merits of deep selections, the issue of what to do with top performers who thrived in a challenging operational environment and are faced with the prospect of returning to a more bureaucratic position is germane to the sabbatical discussion.

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⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Tilghman, "The Army's Other Crisis," 46.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Lewis, "Army Transformation," 83.

⁴⁵ Tilghman, "The Army's Other Crisis," 46.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Leonard Wong, *Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom*: Strategic Studies Institute (Carlisle Barracks; PA: U.S. Army War College), July 2004, 8.

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⁴⁹ David H. Petraeus, "Beyond the Cloister," *The American Interest* 2, no.6 (July/August 2007): 16.

⁵⁰ DeAntona, *Transforming the Operational Career Field Officer Path*, 9-10.

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⁵² Petraeus, "Beyond the Cloister," 16.

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⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Charles A. Henning, *CRS Report for Congress, Army Officer Shortages: Background and Issues for Congress*, (Washington, DC: The Library of Congress, July 5, 2006), 13-14.

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⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

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⁶⁵ Kevin D. Stringer, *The War on Terror and the War for Officer Talent: Linked Challenges for the U.S. Army*, The Land Warfare Papers 67 (Arlington, VA: The Institute of Land Warfare, July 2008), 7-8.

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⁷⁸ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Military Personnel Human Resources Strategic Plan*, 2.

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⁸⁰ Henning, *Army Officer Shortages*, 21.

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⁸² Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Military Personnel Human Resources Strategic Plan*, Appendix B, 4.

⁸³ Chu, "Ensuring Quality People in Defense," 211.

⁸⁴ Thie, *Officer Sabbaticals*, 1.

⁸⁵ Ibid, xv-xvi.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Petraeus, *Beyond the Cloister*, 20.

⁸⁹ James Alden Barber, Jr. "The Social Effects of Military Service" in *The Military and American Society*, ed. Stephen E. Ambrose and James Alden Barber, Jr., (New York: The Free Press, 1972) 151.

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